SPECIAL FEATURE NO. 3-1749 JUNE 7, 1978
ALICE RICHMAN SCHACHNER

"THE BIKO INQUEST" PLAY
(INSERTS IN TAPE LIBRARY)

ANNCR: LESS THAN A YEAR AGO SOUTH AFRICAN BLACK LEADER STEPHEN BIKO DIED OF BRAIN DAMAGE IN A PRISON CELL IN PRETORIA. MR. BIKO'S DEATH ATTRACTED WORLD-WIDE ATTENTION AND THE SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT FELT OBLIGED TO CONDUCT AN INQUEST INTO ITS CAUSE. TWO BRITISH JOURNALISTS HAVE MADE A COURTROOM DRAMA FROM THE TRANSCRIPT OF THOSE PROCEEDINGS AND THEY HAVE BROUGHT THEIR PLAY TO NEW YORK. ALICE RICHMAN HAS THE STORY:

VOICE: STEPHEN BIKO DIED A LONELY AND MISERABLE DEATH ON A MAT ON A STONE FLOOR IN A PRISON CELL..."THESE WORDS SPOKEN BY THE FAMILY'S LAWYER IN THE "BIKO INQUEST" DRAMA COME DIRECTLY FROM THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE ACTUAL INQUEST. THE PLAY WHICH HAS BEEN CONSTRUCTED AROUND THE EVENT IS THE WORK OF JON BLAIR AND NORMAN FENTON. BOTH MEN WERE WORKING ON DIFFERENT DOCUMENTARY PROJECTS WHEN THEY LEARNED OF BIKO'S DEATH. BOTH DECIDED, INDEPENDENTLY, THAT THEY HAD TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT.

IN LONDON THEY COLLABORATED ON A TELEVISED DRAMATIZATION OF THE INQUEST AND IT WAS SHOWN ON THE BBC ONLY SIX DAYS AFTER THE INQUIRY CLOSED. BUT WHEN THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY ASKED THEM TO EXPAND THE TELEVISION PLAY INTO A FULL-LENGTH VERSION FOR THE STAGE, THEY DECIDED TO START FROM THE BEGINNING. ORIGINALLY THE TWO WRITERS HAD USED NEWSPAPER REPORTS FROM JOHANNESBURG. NOW EVERYTHING WOULD COME FROM THE TRANSCRIPT OF THE INQUEST -- THE ACTUAL PERSONS -- THEIR ACTUAL WORDS. THE TRANSCRIPT WAS TWENTY-FIVE

VOICE: HUNDRED PAGES OF CLOSELY TYPED TESTIMONY. JON BLAIR SAYS THAT ONE OF THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS WAS HOW TO DECIDE WHAT PARTS TO USE:

TAPE: CUT ONE -- BLAIR

"WHAT WE DECIDED TO DO IS FOLLOW THE CHRONOLOGY OF STEVE BIKO'S ARREST AND DEATH -- STARTING ON AUGUST EIGHTEENTH WHEN HE WAS ARRESTED AND ENDING ON SEPTEMBER TWELFTH WHEN HE DIED IN A SOUTH AFRICAN PRISON. WHAT WE WERE LOOKING FOR IN LOOKING AT THE TESTIMONY WAS EVIDENCE GIVEN BY THE ACTUAL PARTICIPANTS, THE SECURITY POLICEMEN AND THE DOCTORS WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO BE LOOKING AFTER HIM BUT WHO IN FACT OBSERVED HIS PROGRESS TO HIS DEATH. THE EVIDENCE THEY GAVE, MUCH OF IT SELF-INCRIMINATING, ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO STEVE BIKO WHILE HE WAS IN THEIR CARE AND CUSTODY."

VOICE: THE "BIKO INQUEST" DRAMA HAS BEEN GENERALLY WELL-RECEIVED BY NEW YORK THEATRE CRITICS. MR. BLAIR SAYS THAT THE REVIEWERS HAVE GOTTEN THE POINT THAT THIS IS NOT A CONVENTIONAL STAGE PLAY AND HAVE JUDGED IT ACCORDINGLY. RICHARD EDER OF THE NEW YORK TIMES DESCRIBES THE "BIKO INQUEST" AS "TAUT, POWERFUL AND REVEALING" AND HE APPLAUDS A FINE CAST OF ACTORS HEADED BY FRITZ WEAVER. DAILY NEWS REVIEWER DOUGLAS WATT ALSO PRAISES THE PERFORMERS BUT FINDS THE PRODUCTION LACKING IN DRAMATIC TENSION. CLIVE BARNES OF THE NEW YORK POST WRITES THAT THE "BIKO INQUEST" IS NOT SO MUCH A PLAY AS A POLITICAL STATEMENT VIRTUALLY WITHOUT COMMENT. AND MR. BARNES ADDS, INDEED NO COMMENT IS NECESSARY. AGAIN, JON BLAIR:

TAPE: CUT TWO -- BLAIR

"HE (BIKO) DIED A DEATH ON BEHALF OF POLITICAL PRISONERS ALL OVER THE WORLD, IN MY VIEW. BECAUSE THE UNIQUE THING ABOUT THIS EVENT IN WORLD HISTORY WAS THAT THIS INQUEST REVEALED FOR THE FIRST TIME WHAT GOES ON IN SOUTH AFRICAN PRISONS VIRTUALLY EVERY DAY. WHAT GOES ON UNDER SECURITY POLICE INTERROGATION AND NOT ONLY IN SOUTH AFRICA WHICH OF COURSE WAS HIGHLIGHTED IN THIS INSTANCE -- BUT IN MY BELIEF GOES ON ALL OVER THE WORLD WHERE INQUESTS ARE NOT HELD

VOICE: (CONT'D) THE ACTUAL INQUEST TOOK TWENTY-ONE DAYS. THE PLAY LASTS JUST UNDER TWO HOURS. IN THAT RESPECT JON BLAIR AND HIS PARTNER ALTERED THE REALITY THEY WERE WORKING WITH. THEY ALSO CONCEDE THAT THE ACTOR'S ART CAN BE A DISTORTING FACTOR. BUT HE SAID THEY TRIED TO COMPENSATE BY CASTING THE ROLES AS TRUE TO LIFE AS POSSIBLE. AND THEY INCLUDED NOTHING IN THE DIALOGUE THAT WAS NOT ALREADY THERE.

TAPE: CUT THREE -- BLAIR

"THIS IS NOT AN EDITORIALIZED POLITICAL STATEMENT. IT ISN'T AS IF NORMAN FENTON AND MYSELF SAT DOWN AND SAID 'HOW CAN WE SAY THE WORST POSSIBLE THINGS ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA -- TO MAKE PEOPLE THINK THE WORST POSSIBLE THINGS ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA?' WHAT WE HAVE DONE IS TAKEN ACTUAL TESTIMONY AND WITHOUT EDITORIALIZING, WITHOUT PASSING OUR OWN JUDGMENTS ON IT IN MY VIEW WE HAVE CREATED A FAR MORE DAMAGING INDICTMENT OF SOUTH AFRICA THAN ONE COULD DO IF IT WAS SIMPLY JON BLAIR WRITING ABOUT HIS OWN FELLINGS ABOUT SOUTH AFRICA. WHAT I WOULD ULTIMATELY HOPE TO ACHIEVE IS A GROWING AWARENESS ABOUT THESE KINDS OF THINGS -- THAT THESE THINGS HAPPENED, THAT THEY WILL PROBABLY CONTINUE TO HAPPEN BUT WE SHOULD BE AWARE."

VOICE: AT THE END OF THE PLAY THE MAGISTRATE DELIVERS THE VERDICT THAT STEPHEN BIKO DIED AN ACCIDENTAL DEATH. THE FAMILY LAWYER STARTS READING A LONG LIST OF THOSE WHO HAVE DIED IN DETENTION. HE READS THEIR NAMES AND THE OFFICIAL EXPLANATIONS FOR THEIR DEATHS SUCH AS "SLIPPED IN THE SHOWER" AND "FELL FROM THE WINDOW." THE LIST GOES ON AND REACHES BIKO BUT IT DOES NOT STOP WITH HIS NAME. "AND THAT," JON BLAIR SAID, "IS AS CLOSE TO COMMENT AS WE GET."

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